

Minutes - King County Rural Forest Commission Meeting Thursday, March 13, 2014, Preston Community Center

Commissioners present: Nate Veranth, forest landowner (Chair), Dick Ryon, North Bend resident; Rex Thompson, forester; Doug McClelland, Washington Department of Natural Resources; Daryl Harper, forest landowner; Sandy Miller, forest landowner; Daryl Harper, forest landowner; Brandy Reed, King Conservation District; Cindy Spiry, Snoqualmie Tribe; Matt Rourke, professional forester

Staff: John Taylor, Assistant Director, Water and Land Resources Division (WLRD); Bill Loeber, Forester, WLRD; Kathy Creahan, Manager for Agriculture, Forestry and Incentives, WLRD; and Linda Vane, Commission Liaison

Chair Nate Veranth called the meeting to order at 9:40 a.m.

Minutes: Postponed consideration of the January 16, 2014 minutes until the next meeting on May 8.

Staff and Agency Reports and Announcement

Commission Administration – Linda Vane reminded the commission that the annual financial disclosure statements were distributed in electronic format to their County email addresses.

Snoqualmie Watershed forestry project – Linda provided an update on the Snoqualmie Watershed Forum forestry project, which will identify strategies for recovering threatened salmon, protecting the hydrology of the basin, and retaining active agriculture and forestry. Linda distributed a list of the 12 planning units associated with the project and asked commissioners to contact Beth LeDoux, the Snoqualmie Forum Technical Coordinator, if they wish to review and comment on any of the draft technical papers.

Management of King County Working Forest Update

Bill Loeber, King County Forester

Bill reported on recent resource management activities on lands that are under the purview of King County Parks. He spoke first about the Island Center Forest third-party certification pilot project. He said that the project was initiated in 2008 on the 238-acre Island Center Forest in response to recommendations from Vashon residents, and with support from the Rural Forest Commission. The County subsequently sought and achieved certification by both the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative (SFI), said Bill.

Bill said that the County offered timber sales on Island Center Forest twice in 2012 and received no bids. A third timber auction in 2013 received a single bid, which was accepted. In all three cases, the timber was advertised as third-party certified, although the eventual buyer probably will not sell as to a certified market. Bill said that at this early stage of the project, based on a single sale of low grade Douglas fir and alder logs, there was no evidence of price premiums for certified logs. He explained that among the lessons learned was that relatively low quality of the logs offered for sale and the cost of transporting logs off Vashon Island may have been disincentives for buyers. He concluded that growing and selling timber is a long-term proposition, opportunities to sell certified logs at a premium do occur from time to time, and that the County would continue the pilot project.

Bill went on to update the Commission on other activities in forests managed by King County Parks, including:

- A Forest Stewardship Plan for Vashon Island's Dockton Forest had been completed. The County is planning a 57-acre variable density thinning in a dense stand of 30-year-old Douglas fir in 2014 to improve forest health.
- A Forest Stewardship Plan has been completed for the Danville/Georgetown Open Space in Maple Valley. The plan called for a variable density thinning to improve forest health through active management. This thinning was completed in summer-fall of 2013.
- Youth volunteers and AmeriCorps members planted 5,000 native conifers in McGarvey Park Open Space east of Renton. They also planted 1,600 seedlings on Taylor Mountain Forest.
- The Forest Landscape Assessment Tool (FLAT), developed by King County and partners, shows promise as the basis for a new planning tool that would work well for developing preliminary forest stewardship plans (subject to verification in the field). The University of Washington School of Environmental and Forest Sciences (SEFS) is using the FLAT planning tool in a new applied forest management course. This class uses King County Parks Black Diamond Open Space as a field site and they will prepare a draft forest stewardship plan as a final project.

Update on Third Party Certification of State Trust Lands Forests

Doug McClelland, Assistant Region Manager – Conservation, Recreation and Transactions, Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR)

Doug reported on his field experience with third-party certification of State forestlands. He cautioned that his comments reflected his personal observations and not the policies of the Commissioner of Public Lands or the agency. Introducing the topic, Doug explained that all 2.1 million acres of State Trust Lands forests across the state are SFI certified. A total of 166,000 acres in the South Puget Sound Planning Unit hold FSC as well as SFI certification, he said.

Doug related that earning FSC certification required a significant investment of DNR staff time, but that it was rewarding to hear the FSC auditors praise DNR's land management practices as among the best in the country. Third party certification did not require the state to make significant changes in the management of Trust Lands forests. The primary cost to the state for both SFI and FSC certifications is in record keeping and audit processes.

Doug explained that both SFI and FSC third-party certification programs conduct annual audits of DNR forest management practices. In addition, the state's own auditors conduct annual performance audits to test compliance with the State Forest Practices Act and with the Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) under DNR's permit from the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

Reflecting on the outcomes of third-party certification, Doug said that state and federal regulations play a stronger role in DNR's land management decisions than do third-party forest certification programs. The Forest Practices Act is state law. The HCP is an agreement for 70 years plus another 40 years to manage the land and is required by the federal Clean Water Act and Endangered Species Act (ESA), said Doug. He explained that the State prepared HCPs in response to the spotted owl ESA listings and they cover all potential future listings including marbled murrelet. The HCPs were based on the science of the time. Doug reflected that the HCPs completely changed the way the state managed forests, moving from a commodity-removal perspective to first considering what resources should be left alone and then considering which trees to harvest.

In response to questions about the potential for certified logs to fetch a premium price, Doug said that when timber prices were very low a few years ago, potential buyers showed a preference for certified logs. Certification does not seem to have been a factor in more recent timber sales. Doug speculated that when the demand for lumber is very low and prices depressed, that certified lumber may have an edge over non-certified in the marketplace.

A general discussion of third-party certification of forests ensued. Some of the comments from commissioners were:

- Third party certification has better marginal benefit for environmental outcomes from forest management in states where the forest practice rules are not as strong as those in Washington.
- One of the benefits of third party certification is the perception of how the land is being managed.
- One may not see a premium for certified logs in actual practice. A mill may advertise a premium price, but when one factors in the transportation costs, it may be better from an economic standpoint to take logs to a non-certified mill that is closer.
- There may be more of a premium price in specialized markets or specialty woods. It is hard to market timber in a timely way and hard to mix with a larger or contract logging scenario. There may be scenarios that are more conducive to marketing third-party certified wood and getting the premium price.
- Third-party certification made the timber industry think about what they needed to do in order to be on top of things. They value the oversight because it helps them achieve their goal of being top notch and they know the public cares.
- Small forest landowners who are not engaged in harvesting on a commercial level may seek certification in order to be a responsible forest steward. Technical assistance could be accessed through the certification process. In addition, collecting the necessary data and applying for certification can be a means of engaging small forest landowners with their land.
- Education for urban residents about the value of forest management and explaining practical aspects forest stewardship, like Douglas fir being shade intolerant, are needed.

King County Rural Forest Commission 2013-14 Priorities

Linda Vane, Liaison for the Rural Forest Commission

Linda distributed the commission's list of priority actions for 2013-14, updated to show current status. Linda asked the commission for revisions to the table. There was significant discussion on the topic of economic development opportunities through forestry, particularly in local specialty products, as well as building opportunities to work with the Tribes, DPER soft surface trail permitting processes, and cooperation with the Agriculture Commission.

King Conservation District Update

Brandy Reed, Senior Program Manager, King Conservation District (KCD)

Brandy briefed the commission on the KCD's actions to implement the recommendations of the 2013 KCD Task Force and Conservation Panel process. Among the recommendations were that the KCD should increase services related to rural forest stewardship and urban forestry.

Brandy explained that the KCD's Advisory Committee would assist the KCD to develop a plan and cost estimates for implementing the recommendation. This work would directly affect KCD's proposal to King County for the rates and charges structure in 2015 and beyond, according to Brandy.

Brandy outlined the process for public input. She said that the KCD is committed to integrating into that process a proposed program of services that will serve rural and urban forests. The commission expressed their willingness to participate in the public review process.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:30 p.m.

Next meeting

The next meeting will be held on May 8, 2014, at the Preston Community Center.

Staff Liaison: Linda Vane, at 206-477-4842 or linda.vane@kingcounty.gov